

DRO

Deakin University's Research Repository

This is the published version:

Marvell, Leon 2011, Just a beginning, *ArtsHub online*, pp. 1-1.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30049942>

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2011, Arts Hub Holdings Australia

Just a Beginning

By [Leon Marvell ArtsHub](#) | Tuesday, August 16, 2011

- [Print this page](#)



Just a Beginning (*Ce n'est qu'un début*), directed and shot by Pierre Barouquier and Jean-Pierre Pozzi, is a remarkable documentary that observes a class at the *École maternelle Jacques Prévert* (Jacques Prévert Preschool) over a period of two years. This isn't, however, your average French preschool class of painting sessions, afternoon sleeps and games in the yard. This is an experiment in preschool philosophy.

For several sessions a week, the class teacher, Pascaline Dogliani, calls for quiet, sits down and then solemnly lights a candle. This is the sign that the philosophy session has begun. The children are now gathered around in a circle, Pascaline announces the theme of the discussion, and the children begin to talk.

As the film follows a linear chronology, we observe the very beginnings of this experiment in preschool philosophising where the children are quite evidently unsure as to what exactly they should be doing and how they should behave. Yet slowly we see tentative thoughts beginning to be expressed. These thoughts are often confused and often contradictory (by adult lights at least), but the conversation has begun, and Pascaline gently encourages the process at every step.

Among these conversations we learn some remarkable things. For example, did you know that the human soul is invisible and blue and that it comes out of your tummy? Did you know that animals are like your parents only hairier? As the class progresses in their sessions, these metaphysical observations are balanced throughout by equally remarkable interpersonal discussions about big philosophical themes such as Love and Death and Freedom as well as innocent evaluations of the virtues of having white or brown skin.

It is to Pascaline Dogliani's credit that she refuses to steer or direct the flow of the discussion even when it enters uncomfortable territory (as when the children discuss the virtues of different skin colour for example) and instead we watch her as she allows the children's musings to follow their own logic and end inconclusively — yet with the implicit understanding that the *thinking* and the *talking* are what is important, and not any artificial consensus or agreement.

There are practical consequences of all this talking and thinking. At one point we see Pascaline having to prevent one of the children from hitting another. Rather than scolding the child, she asks him to think about all that they have been doing together, all their thinking and talking and sharing, and whether resorting to hitting another child is acceptable to a class of thinkers and talkers. Of course the little boy is contrite and sullen as all children would be under such circumstances, but we get the distinct feeling that *this* boy understands the wrongness of his actions much more than a little boy who had not been so intimately involved in the philosophy sessions.

Barougier and Pozzi's coverage of these amazing sessions is intimate and gentle. Their camera never seems to invade the space of this little class (as the 'documentary eye' often seems to do: just think of the films of Michael Moore for example), and through judicious use of close-ups and reaction shots we get the feeling that we are really getting to know some of these children. We are certainly left with the idea that we have seen them emotionally and intellectually grow over the period in which they attend their class with Pascaline. This is confirmed when the filmmakers spend time with the parents of some of the children. Nearly all of them assert that their children are much more confident and enquiring at home, often starting philosophical conversations themselves around the dinner table. And all this from children who are not yet five years old!

The DVD comes with some extended interviews: Pascaline Dogliani talks at length about her feelings about the class and a philosophy professor from a metropolitan university talks about the wonderful and revolutionary risk of "daring to trust children." All of these extras are indispensable viewing after watching the film.

I suppose the best evaluation to this film came from my partner who, after viewing it for the first time, said, "If only we could send our daughter to such a class!"

Rating: four and a half stars

Just a Beginning

Directed by Pierre Barougier and Jean-Pierre Pozzi

France, 2010, 103 mins

Rated PG

Available to rent or buy through Madman Entertainment

Watch the French-language version of the *Just a Beginning* trailer below